

## Ephrem, Against Heresies, Hymns 23 and 24

Translated by Adam C. McCollum

The translation<sup>1</sup> was made from the standard edition of the Syriac text: Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra haereses*, CSCO 169 // SS 76 (Louvain, 1957). I have added only a very select number of annotations.

### Hymn 23

*To the same melody*

1

The twelve apostles were  
Farmers of the whole world,  
And there was neither place nor corner  
Called by their names,  
Until weeds were brought forth,<sup>2</sup>  
After the farmers had departed,  
And with their names  
They called weeds wheat.  
On the day of harvest they will be uprooted!  
Blessed is he whose harvest has arrived!  
*Response:* Praise to you from [those who are] true!

2

---

<sup>1</sup> Commissioned by Mr. Roger Pearse. The translator welcomes corrections, comments, and queries sent to acmccollum101 AT gmail DOT com.

<sup>2</sup> “Weeds” are an recurring symbol of seemingly Christian distortions of Christianity for Ephrem, who takes his cue from Mt 13:26-30, 36-43. The Syriac word for “weeds” (*zizānē*) here is a loanword from Greek, the original of which occurs in the Greek of this Gospel passage.

They have taught me that I should hate them,  
Because the hidden books they have written,  
As one would hide a blemish  
They hide them, lest they should be laid bare.  
The church has shown its loveliness,  
Openly its beauty is praised.  
No spots are in it to hide,  
Nor blemish to cover,  
For its<sup>3</sup> teaching is obvious, like the light.  
*Response:* Blessed is he who illumines it [the church] with his truth!

3

Joab conquered the city  
That was the royal city,  
And without its being named with the name  
Of Joab, the general conquered it.  
He sent word to David, who hurried  
That he might enter it as a king,  
And it was [so] named, for he, too, had conquered it:  
Joab was toiling as a servant,  
And the king's name was named.  
*Response:* Praise to you from [those who are] true!

4

The apostles and the prophets were  
Great men and generals.

---

<sup>3</sup> Unlike the foregoing, the possessive pronominal suffix here is masculine; it is possibly a mistake for the feminine, and I have rendered it accordingly. Alternatively, it should be taken as “his” = “Christ’s”, the subject of the response in the next line.

They toiled, labored, made disciples, taught,  
And conquered walled cities and towns.<sup>4</sup>  
The prophets and apostles were toiling,  
And the name of God being named.  
Our Lord labored, he toiled and taught,  
Yet the name of the false is named,  
For people call themselves by their name.  
*Response:* Blessed is he by whose name they are laid bare!

5  
Let the Bardaiṣanites be asked  
How and why  
They have called themselves by Bardaiṣan's name,  
And what the cause of their appellation is.  
If it is that they are born of him,  
Like the Hebrews from Eber,  
If that they were made disciples by him,  
The appellation by his name is to be reproached,  
Because he composed a bad doctrine.  
*Response:* Blessed is the one who has laid bare their frauds!

6  
Not everyone who makes disciples  
Calls his disciples by his own name.  
The apostle to the nations [Paul] made disciples,  
But he named no one with his name.

---

<sup>4</sup> In the previous stanza the word for city is the more common *mdi(n)tā*, here the words are *karkā* and *māḥozā*.

The name with which he made them disciples,  
In that name he baptized them;  
The name in which he baptized them,  
The same he had them worship.  
To that name he ascribed everything.  
*Response:* Blessed is the one to whom everything is due!

7

A certain demon among the Greeks,  
When he began to introduce whoredom,  
He feigned himself [to be something he was not] to each one<sup>5</sup>  
By means of that which was comely to it [the church].  
And today, in various manners,  
He has seduced the simple.  
Sometimes he captures it [the church] with fasting,  
Sometimes with sackcloth and vegetables,<sup>6</sup>  
And sometimes he takes it captive with speech.  
*Response:* Blessed is the one who brings his wiles to naught!

8

Hateful fraud cannot  
Adorn itself without the truth,  
Nor falsehood walk  
Without the footsteps of verity.

---

<sup>5</sup> The verbs in this stanza are masculine and have as subject the “demon” of the first line, and the objects (singular and plural), including “each one” and “the simple” (plural), are feminine, referring to a bride or brides (see the next stanza), with reference to the church or parts thereof. The meaning, nevertheless, is not entirely clear.

<sup>6</sup> That is, ascetic clothing and diet.

They have betrothed the bride with his beauty,<sup>7</sup>  
And this proves that they are hateful.  
And having betrothed her to themselves, they married her  
That had been covered,<sup>8</sup> because they are deceitful.  
Who will not flee from them?  
*Response:* Blessed is the one in whom all take refuge!

9

Let us take it further,<sup>9</sup>  
That we even be heard by the deaf.  
You I make an arbiter!  
You choose, O hearer,  
Which is greater and more praiseworthy:  
That you be called Christian [*mšīḥāyā*],  
Or named Marcionite,  
That they call you Christian [*kristyānā*],  
Or a Daisanite weed!  
*Response:* Blessed is the one for whom all ardently long!

10

While as yet Bardaiṣan is,  
And Marcion is named,  
Let us go to the ancients,  
Who are older than Marcion;

---

<sup>7</sup> That is, the heretics have used the beauty of Christ (mixed, of course, with error) to beguile and seduce the church into a close relationship.

<sup>8</sup> Presumably referring to her already having been marked for marriage to another (i.e. Jesus).

<sup>9</sup> I take the last word in the line [*pšāṭē*] as a cognate accusative with the verb (“let us extend extensions”), and the meaning to be along the lines of, “Let us extend further into clarity the things we have been discussing.”

Let us see how the ancient churches

Were named,

And with that name let us be named!

Let us throw and cast off appellations

Of names that came afterward!

*Response:* Blessed is the one who has been perpetuated by his names!

## Hymn 24

*To the same melody*

1

The deniers have dared to wipe out  
The books, lest they be proven wrong,  
But with one thing<sup>10</sup> they left they have been laid bare.  
This [one thing] is sufficient and plenty so:  
Our Lord preserves it in his book,  
And they have not wiped it out like the others,  
And lest they wipe it out now  
Our Lord preserves it and me,  
So that I do not become a cause against it.<sup>11</sup>  
*Response:* Blessed is the one who preserves my faith!

2

The true one has commanded and warned  
That they should have no master.<sup>12</sup>  
The apostle who feared was worried  
That the flock would be called by his name.  
That which the apostle feared,  
For *that* weeds are choked out.  
Their cause is authority,

---

<sup>10</sup> This “one thing” is probably the theme Ephrem discusses in the hymn: that those he considers false Christian teachers, being outside of the succession of apostolic teaching, use their own names for their flocks, rather than that of Christ.

<sup>11</sup> The meaning is not immediate, but Ephrem’s reference to himself here is perhaps simply a prayer for him to be kept on the side of truth and orthodoxy.

<sup>12</sup> Mt 23:8. The word here is *rabbā*; later he also refers to *malpānē* “teachers”.

For which everyone strives:

Who might sit on the throne?

*Response:* Blessed is the one whose cross rebukes us!

3

The master in his knowledge withheld thrones

From the sons of Zebedee,<sup>13</sup>

Lest we in turn take

This precedent from there.

With his questions he turned them aside

From hubris to humility,

That with them [the questions] he might drive back our haughtiness.

Instead of glory, suffering he offered,<sup>14</sup>

As a rebuker of our pride.

*Response:* Blessed is the high one who stood up at court!<sup>15</sup>

4

O for true bride-brokers,

Who have not changed themselves<sup>16</sup> against the bridegroom,

While the flock says, “I

Belong to Kephas”, “to Paul”, or “to Apollo”!

O flock that has marked itself

With the names of its companions!

The good servants have feared and have removed

---

<sup>13</sup> Mt 20:20-28.

<sup>14</sup> The reading of the manuscript is uncertain; this translation follows Beck’s conjecture. The first three words of this line when read aloud in Syriac have a noticeable sound-repetition: *ḥlāp šubḥā ḥaššā*.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Mt 27:11.

<sup>16</sup> That is, have not initially been on the bridegroom’s side only later to work against him. See also 5.4 below.



Their names from the flock,  
And have marked it with the mark of its<sup>17</sup> Lord.

*Response:* Blessed is the one who has marked it with his apostles!

5

Now false teachers are  
Like bride-brokers of falsehood  
That were sent out as true  
But changed themselves<sup>18</sup> like deceivers,  
For it is they themselves that have betrothed  
The bride of Christ.  
With the beauty of the bridegroom they have imitated [him],  
That they might take the bride captive with his beauty:  
They have armed themselves against him with what is his!

*Response:* Blessed is the one in whose furnace they are laid bare!

6

John, too, was a bride-broker,  
Who sensed his Lord's bride,  
Who looked at him as at his Lord.<sup>19</sup>  
He was revealed as a servant because he was a servant:  
He showed his mortal nature,  
He showed his lower rank;<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Beck's text has a masculine singular pronominal suffix here, but it is probably a mistake for the feminine, which would agree with the object-suffix on the verb in this line and fit either of the two words used for "flock" in this stanza (ʿānā and mar'itā, both of feminine gender); there is nothing in the immediate vicinity that is masculine singular.

<sup>18</sup> See 4.2 above.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jn 3:29.

Glory and humiliation he showed her [the bride],  
Because he was not even worthy to untie  
The strap of the bridegroom's sandal.<sup>21</sup>

*Response:* Blessed is the one who taught him to persuade her!

7

Now false teachers  
Have brandished at her a borrowed beauty,  
The Refinement of their words,  
Because whoever wishes to violate  
The bride of his glorious Lord  
Enhances and adorns himself.  
But look! They are ugly, although they have adorned themselves,  
Because the humility of Jesus is more comely  
Than the beauty of created things!

*Response:* Blessed is the one even whose shame is praise!

8

The Greeks saw his greatness,  
As well as the Persians and the Egyptians.  
Their mouth denied their idols  
And the names of their gods.  
The [once] corrupt repented and denied  
The names of their masters,  
And they confessed the master of truth.  
Look! Weeds are named

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jn 3:30.

<sup>21</sup> Jn 1:27.

Using the names of people who err!

*Response:* Blessed is the one who brings back the erring!

9

They have soiled the bride of the Son

Among the Greeks, of whom, too,

The disciples name themselves

With the names of their masters.

The bride, whose love has staggered,

Has clothed herself with the names<sup>22</sup> of servants.

The vehement bride-broker<sup>23</sup> is zealous

Lest she stagger and be violated,

And he has cut off those names.

*Response:* Blessed is the one who has handed over the zealous to her!

10

If the apostle were [here]

Today in a body,<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Beck's text has this word singular; the translation above follows another reading from his apparatus.

<sup>23</sup> This word refers either to Jesus or to Paul, the latter being explicitly introduced in the following stanza. Hitherto Jesus has been called *ḥatnā* "bridegroom", and the word here, *mākorā* (used before more than once in the plural), may also mean the same thing, but to highlight the difference I have translated its occurrence here just as in the previous cases. Why did Ephrem not simply use *ḥatnā* again? For one thing, three syllables, not two, are needed to fit the meter in this spot, and for another, he may mean to highlight both that Jesus is not merely the church's bridegroom, but also the one looks out for her on all sides like a bride-broker might. Paul might be seen in this text, which flows from 1Cor 1:10-13, as the one who wants the church to be primarily rooted together in Christ, not in any of the church's personalities.

<sup>24</sup> The construction *it l-* admits more than one meaning. Since this is a native Syriac text, and a relatively early one, it is unlikely to be the use following from that of Greek ἔχειν (including that with certain adverbs like ἔχειν καλῶς, "to be well") that occurs in translations from Greek. It is possible that this is a case of *it l-* = simple *it* (cf. Nöldeke, *Grammar*, § 308b), but the fact that we do have an adverb here (*pagrānā'it* "bodily") and that the meaning fits, may be evidence of a construction analogous to, but not necessarily inspired by,

He would wipe out the memories  
Of the false [apostles], as in the case of Amalek,<sup>25</sup>  
For if he did not allow the name of Simon  
To be named over the flock,<sup>26</sup>  
How much more would he wipe out the names  
Of the thieves who cut off [and] took it [the flock] with them,  
And called it by their names!

*Response:* Blessed is the one who has made it dependent on his praiseworthy name!

11

Marcion, who first blasphemed,  
Was unable to flee from his name,  
The name that went out from his schism,  
The appellation from his division.<sup>27</sup>  
Even a thief does not want  
People to call him according to his work,  
But obligatorily he is named  
“Thief” according to his work.  
Deeds give us names!

*Response:* Blessed is the one with whose name we are dressed!

---

the aforementioned Greek usage with an adverb.

<sup>25</sup> See Ex 17:14.

<sup>26</sup> The actor in this stanza is Paul, and this is probably another reference to 1Cor 1:12, where he does not approve of a church member who says “I belong to Kephas” (i.e. Simon Peter). If Jesus were in view, we might also think of Mt 16:16-19, especially vv. 18-19, where he specifically does not use “Simon” when discussing the foundation of the church, but Peter/Kephas; even the latter, though, is not used to *name* the church (see also 20.7-8 below).

<sup>27</sup> That is, Marcion may have wanted to dissociate himself from his own name and only had his followers known by Jesus’ name, but because his teaching did not follow orthodoxy, he could not claim only Jesus’ name, but had to go by his own.

12

The holy church flees  
From names of people, my brothers:  
Of the Sabellians and Arians,  
Together with the rest of those who have separated,  
Who do not want to be named  
With the names of their masters.  
They have plotted cleverly to make themselves beautiful for her [the church],  
Because they have sensed her love,  
How she is wholly dependent on Christ.  
*Response:* Blessed is the name on which she depends!

13

Have they not read in the apostle, who reproaches  
The one that says, “I belong to Kephas”,  
Another, “to Paul”, “to Apollo”?  
What a horror, brothers,  
That they read,<sup>28</sup> but still dare to set  
Their names on the flock!  
The readers are not afraid,  
The hearers are not ashamed  
To be named with the names of people!  
*Response:* Blessed is that name with which we are named!

14

Come, let's see who

---

<sup>28</sup> This translation follows the correction noted in Beck's apparatus.

Has the teaching of the apostles,  
Those who did not call by their names  
The bride of the son.  
A teacher, therefore, who sets  
His name on the flock,  
His teaching is far from that of the apostles,  
But one who has called it [the flock] by the name of its Lord,  
It is with him that the truth is present.

*Response:* Blessed is the one who has made known with whom [the apostles' teaching is]!

15

The wise Greeks, too,  
By the name of this and that one from among them  
Their disciples, O my brothers,  
Have been and are called.  
People have been enslaved to people,  
They have been called by their names,  
And look! Against the name of Lord and God  
They have arrogantly behaved,  
For they have set their name on humanity!

*Response:* Blessed is the one who has set his name on us!

16

One unclean doctrine  
They named with the name of an abominable dog.<sup>29</sup>  
Those crazy people were not afraid

---

<sup>29</sup> That is, presumably “cynic” (*kalbāyā* < *kalbā* \ κυνικός < κύων), although here Ephrem uses only the noun itself (as the second member of a genitive construction) and not the derived adjective.

To be named with the name of “dog”,  
Just as the Audians were not  
Ashamed [to be named] with the name of “owl”,<sup>30</sup>  
Nor the Arians, nor the Quqites,  
And all their abominable names,  
Each and every one, O my beloved.  
*Response:* Blessed is that name with which we have been adorned!

17  
A name of wolves they have spread over the sheep,  
And the doves have put on a name of hawks.  
The grains of wheat have abandoned their good name  
And have taken a name of thorns.  
The apostle reproved the Corinthians,  
Before whom their Lord was crucified.<sup>31</sup>  
They named themselves with the name of servants,  
Of victorious Kephas and Paul.  
How much, then, do the deniers elicit anger!  
*Response:* Blessed is that name we confess!

18  
They preach many Christs:  
One that came in the years of Mani,  
Another in the days of Bardaiṣan,  
[At the time of] Marcion yet another,  
And another Christ who came

---

<sup>30</sup> A wordplay between ‘āwdāyyē “Audians” and ‘odā “owl”.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 1:13, 23.

In the days of the apostles.

Christs who are many contend,

And if just one among them is divided,

By their own mouth he contends with himself!

*Response:* Blessed is the one who agrees with himself!

19

The time, too, is abominable, my brothers,

In which these weeds sprang up,

For, look, their times are confused

And their teachings foreign.

If they received from the apostles,

Who, then, among them received?

Arius, who was today,

Or Mani, who sprang up yesterday,

Or Qamṣu,<sup>32</sup> whom the earth belched forth?

*Response:* Blessed is the one who laughs in heaven!<sup>33</sup>

20

The apostles preached for years,

And then others after them,

And there were not yet the weeds

That came afterward.

---

<sup>32</sup> This woman, apparently connected with the Sabbatians, is also referred to in *Contra haer.* 2.6. Jacob of Edessa was asked about her and he responded in a letter: see F. Nau, "Traduction des lettres XII et XIII de Jacques d'Édesse (fin)," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 10 (1905): 277-278, a French translation of a Syriac text published by W. Wright, without translation, in "Two Epistles of Mâr Jacob, Bishop of Edessa," *Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* X, 20 (1867), 430-460."

<sup>33</sup> Ps 2:4.



Let them tell us by which name

That first teaching is named,

The one Simon taught.

It was not [even] named with the name of Kephas,<sup>34</sup>

Paul and Apollo bearing witness.

*Response:* Blessed is the one by whose witnesses they are reproved!

21

The church was [already at the beginning] that of the peoples,<sup>35</sup>

And then he laid waste to the temple of the people,<sup>36</sup>

And when he had uprooted the temple of the people,

There the church was built.

Marcion did not serve in it,

Because he was not yet mentioned.

Arius, next, did not enter it,

Nor Mani and Bardaiṣan.

The prophets handed down [teaching] to the apostles.

*Response:* Blessed is the Lord<sup>37</sup> of orders.<sup>38</sup>

22

He conveyed it from Adam to Noah,

It extended from Noah to Abraham,

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. 10.5-6 above.

<sup>35</sup> On “people/peoples” or “nation/nations” in fourth century Syriac Christianity, see especially Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (1975), ch. 1.

<sup>36</sup> As Beck also notes in his German translation (p. 90, nn. 18-19), Ephrem’s grasp and presentation of the events underlying this stanza are less than clear.

<sup>37</sup> In Beck’s text, “Lord” is marked as plural, which must be an error.

<sup>38</sup> That is, the orderly succession of teaching from the prophets to the apostles.

And from Abraham onto Moses,  
From Moses to David,  
And from David to the [Babylonian] captivity,  
And from Babylon to our savior.<sup>39</sup>  
The people were scattered and they cut off [the progression],  
And all his successions came to an end,  
And the hand of the apostles conveyed it.  
*Response:* Blessed is the Lord of successions!

23

He who commanded concerning the ark,  
It is he who built the temple of the people.  
He who brought them over,<sup>40</sup>  
He established the holy church.  
He who arranges the successions  
Of natures and created things,  
He arranges, too, the successions  
Of prophets and apostles  
For ever and ever!  
*Response:* Blessed is the one who began and will bring to completion!

---

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Mt 1:17.

<sup>40</sup> That is, the one who saved the people in the ark and who brought the Gentiles to the temple.